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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 001307

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ELA AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/09/2029

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM KIRF EG

SUBJECT: SECURITY FORCES PREVENT COPTIC CEREMONY,  
PRECIPITATE CLASHES

REF: A. CAIRO 477

1B. 08 CAIRO 2515

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. KEY POINTS

-- (C) The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), a credible NGO, briefed us July 7 on its fact-finding mission to the village of Ezbet Boushra where sectarian clashes broke out June 21.

-- (C) EIPR said the clashes began when security forces prevented village Copts from conducting a religious ceremony in a building where they had been holding prayers since 2006.

-- (C) According to EIPR, Muslims were injured in the ensuing clashes with Copts, and security forces injured Copts as they made arrests. Coptic villagers believe security forces were responsible for destroying crops in 12 Coptic-owned farms the night of June 21.

-- (C) Starting June 29, security forces have prevented Copts from holding prayers in the building they had used since 12006. A June 30 reconciliation session presided over by the governor was unproductive. We raised the case July 9 with the MFA.

12. (C) EIPR Executive Director Hossam Bahgat told us that an EIPR fact-finding team visited the village of Ezbet Boushra outside Bene Sweif (approximately 80 miles south of Cairo) in late June and early July to investigate the June 21 sectarian clashes. The village of about 2,500 people has approximately 300 Coptic residents. Bahgat said that despite some conflicting accounts, a baseline narrative has emerged. On July 7, EIPR Deputy Director Soha Abdelatty briefed us on the fact-finding team's conclusions following extensive interviews with Copts and Muslims in the village. She said EIPR would release its conclusions publicly in the coming days.

13. (C) According to Abdelatty, "This was not a typical Coptic-Muslim clash, but was led by GOE security forces." She said that in 2006 the Coptic Church bought a factory building in the village and transformed it into a church. The village Copts never applied for a permit for a church, because "they understood" their application would have been rejected. She said that for the past three years, the priest lived in the building and held prayers there, but not more formal "services" or "ceremonies." The village Muslims were aware of this, and the two religious communities coexisted without any tensions.

14. (C) Abdelatty said the situation changed on June 21 when the village's Coptic community decided to hold a religious "ceremony" for the first time. GOE security forces, supported by village Muslims, prevented Copts from entering

the building to participate in the ceremony. In the physical fighting that ensued between Coptic and Muslim villagers, eight Muslims sustained light injuries. No Copts were initially injured in this fighting, but security forces subsequently began "random arrests" of Coptic villagers and injured them in the process. Abdelatty said the number of Copts injured during the arrests is unclear, but the injuries were light, and the Copts were questioned and quickly released.

¶ 15. (C) Abdelatty said the EIPR fact-finding team determined that security forces imposed a curfew the night of June 21 on the entire village. During the night of the curfew, crops at 12 Coptic-owned farms were destroyed. Copts interviewed by EIPR believe that because the curfew was imposed on the entire village, security forces must have been responsible for the damage, with the support of some Muslim villagers. On June 29, security forces asked the priest to vacate the factory building where he has lived since 2006, and subsequently prevented Copts from conducting any prayers in the building.

¶ 16. (C) EIPR staff attended a June 30 "reconciliation session" that the Bene Sweif Governor convened. The staff reported that the governor did not mention the clashes, and asked all attendees not to discuss the June 21 events. Copts and Muslims who attended the session told EIPR that it was an unproductive "farce." Abdelatty characterized the Governor's June 22 statements to local satellite television that he would provide land for the village Copts to build a new church as disingenuous. Abdelatty noted that the Copts are now left without a church in the village, and will need to

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travel to the closest church, which is approximately 15 miles away. She said that the village remains calm, but tensions persist.

¶ 17. (C) On July 9, we raised the incident and the reported role of the security forces with MFA Deputy Director for Human Rights Amgad Rezk. He promised to consult with the Interior Ministry to determine whether the GOE is pursuing any prosecutions. Rezk committed to getting back to us with what he learns from the MOI. Separately, human rights contacts have told us that they blame the incident on discriminatory GOE policies against Copts.

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Account from Christian Contacts  
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¶ 18. (C) Lawyer for the Coptic community Nabil Ghobrial and journalist for the "Al-Watani" Coptic newspaper Emad Khalil offered a slightly different account of the June 21 events. They told us that the incident began after a group of Coptic visitors from Cairo tried to enter the apartment of the village priest, which is a floor above the apartment used by the village's Copts for church services. According to these contacts, security forces prevented the group from entering the building, and then spread rumors that the group was trying to pray in the apartment used as a church. Subsequently, about 75 Muslim villagers gathered outside the building, and physical fighting broke out between Copts and Muslims after a Coptic woman slapped a Muslim.

¶ 19. (C) Ghobrial and Khalil said that the fighting resulted in only light injuries to 18 Copts and Muslims, and that during the clashes Muslims stoned the homes of Copts and uprooted some of their crops. They said police arrested 8 Muslims and 19 Copts, and released them all quickly. A large GOE security presence restored order by June 23. These two contacts reported unconfirmed rumors of GOE security forces looting Coptic homes.

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Comment

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¶10. (C) We believe that EIPR's account of events, gleaned from extensive interviews over several days in Ezbet Boushra, is probably the most accurate version we have heard. The fact that it took EIPR weeks to gather the information illustrates the difficulty of establishing a narrative of events in a small, relatively remote village such as Ezbet Boushra. The accounts of security forces' role in the clashes are troubling, as is the lack of a resolution to Coptic villagers' need for a place of worship, and we will continue to press the GOE to conduct a credible investigation.

SCOBETY